

The Lydian

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Translated from French by Patricia Worth

Not long ago and not far away, a sculptor in love with his statue, as in the days of Pygmalion the King of Cyprus, reproduced the same miracle and brought her to life, transforming the marble into living flesh through which glorious blood flowed by his will and the force of his overpowering desire. Gerard Sainty had long been consumed with a burning passion for the figure of Omphale that he himself had modeled out of clay and then discovered anew in the hard whiteness of marble. He shut himself away in the studio and renounced all that was not her, not wanting to drink or eat or have any dealings with man. Through the glass roof the April spring cast its first rays of sunshine, and for three days Gerard sat fast, his eyes fixed on the eyes of the statue and on her lips which at times seemed to want to open and speak.

He did not sleep, he did not shift from the spot. But, overcome and broken by his feverish ardor, he finally approached the statue as though to die in the painful ecstasy of his passion, having nothing alive in him but his desire. As his trembling hands took hers, he madly, furiously, with the awful intensity that human thought can acquire when disconnected from everything and focused on a single point, longed to see and feel her living! And indeed the miracle was accomplished. With a pleasure so terrible and so divine that he believed he had Death's gentle wing on his forehead, he sensed that the marble was losing its coldness and acquiring the heat of life. Omphale's marble body took on a warm whiteness with flushes of pink, the delicate veins turned blue, the limbs became aware of their elasticity, and the head, the divine head graced with a golden crown, came to life, pale and filled with emotion, lips reddening and nostrils quivering, with eyes of gold, and the heavy blonde hair flowed over the shoulders and the flexible back, like the waves of an angry sea kissed by a tawny sun.

Releasing her fresh warm hands from the sculptor's, the great Omphale stepped away, free and proud, crowned with gold, letting the beautiful bloodstained lion skin float about her. Gerard ran to her, wanted to hold her, and on her lips like a pale flower he wanted to place a kiss born of his long and persistent desire; but with a quick unequivocal decision the divinely naked Queen drew back.

On a table of tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl sat a flagon filled with wine the color of topaz, and, close by, a loaf made with fine wheaten flour. Gerard half-filled the glass and tried to bring it to the lips of his royal love, but she drew back again. Then her celestial lips opened and the sculptor heard the sound of her smooth, imperious voice.

"So, you love me!" said she.

"Oh!" said Gerard, who once more extended his eager arms to hold her. The whole studio seemed to be alive with a powerful, melodious joy. The women of the tapestries were superb in their flying raiment, proudly wearing their dresses clasped up and open over bare legs. Delicate sculpted miniatures of Flemish furniture, ebony pieces encrusted with ivory and pewter, floating white and pink damasks, red lacquers, cut flowers in vases offering an intoxicating gamut of color and light, jewels, small caskets ornamented with glistening gemstones: all of these were singing a kind of hymn of ravishment and love. Flaunting her pointed breasts, her polished belly and noble warrior legs, the great Omphale placed her bare feet on carpets brightened with tones of turquoise, burgundy and pink, while all the statues in the studio seemed to watch her curiously, enviously, with a calm dread.

"Oh," said Gerard, placing his yearning hands on the already warm marble arms.

"No," said Omphale. "Let's see first if the life you can give me is worth the trouble of living! As long as human lips have not brushed mine," she added, "as long as I have not touched

the food of men, this bread and this flame-gold wine, I'm free to return to the icy cold stillness, to become again a marble statue and to regain the imperishable beauty that your genius gave me."

"No," said Gerard Sainty, "live for me!"

"Well," said Omphale, as her eyes gleaming with anger passed over the statues in the studio, "let's begin by dashing these to pieces!"

She started brandishing her club, a large, crude, knobby branch on which hair clung in places to bloodstains, and she walked toward the statues. Sculpted in marble, there was the gentle rival of the Nereids, Andromeda, about to be devoured by the monster, her gaze ardently questioning heaven. Moulded in plaster, there was the Amazon Atalanta who was fed on bear's milk, her nimble limbs made slender by hunting and war. There was Salmacis the Carian nymph, barely sketched, still captive in the rugged white marble, united intimately with the waters of her murmuring fountain. And modeled only in clay, still wet, still showing the hesitations, the caresses, the serendipitous discoveries and the boldness of recent work, there was Ariadne, smiling and joyous, madly in love, crowned with grapes, transfigured by a god's kisses, frolicking with panthers and lion cubs. Omphale lunged forth to savagely smash the statues with the hideously knotted branch; but in an instinctive, involuntary movement, the sculptor had thrown himself before her as though to defend his threatened works. Then the Queen looked on him with a profound, sovereign and incurable contempt.

"So," she said, "I would live as prey offered to your kisses, fed on the bread of men, subject to infirmities and death, and the statues here would not be destroyed! And I would have as rivals these daughters of your thoughts and your industrious hands, these creatures born motherless as I was, and who will remain, as I was, silent and divine! And who can say that the beauty of any one of them is not equal to mine and that your all-powerful desire, armed and as strong as a god, will not bring her to life too, while I would waste away, a woman in despair and in tears, with the affliction of my grievous jealousy! Ah, it would be a thousand times better to return to the exquisite frozen oblivion where the awareness of my existence was nothing but an imperceptible rhythm, vibrating in the infinite ecstasy of unblemished whiteness!"

"Well then," said Gerard, "let's smash the statues!"

"No, you grieve for them," said Queen Omphale, "and this grieving would forever be like a cold snake biting at my heart."

Then she threw aside the club, and seizing the sculptor's trembling hands in her own, she fixed her eyes on him in quiet anger.

"You will see me become again insensitive marble," she continued, "and I want to give back to you—to my lover!—in a long embrace, the fleeting life you gave me!"

Gerard was horrified to feel the hands of his beloved growing cold, then frigid, then inanimate. He wanted to pull his hands away but was held in a vice-like grip, captive in Omphale's imperious gaze, and he saw the colors of life slowly fading from her arms and her body, disappearing and melting into the whiteness. At the moment when the face of his adored one resumed its marmoreal rigidity, he believed he saw that a single tear, cold, desperate and sinister, had fallen from one of her eyes and frozen on her cheek. But he did not have long to look at this grievous stone tear. The same coldness engulfing the statue's body was penetrating his own limbs; he was suffering with all the tortures of death by cold; his congealed blood had ceased to circulate, his hair stood on end, his stiff fingers could not move. At last, the statue's hand grew still, Gerard Sainty's fingers were free and he fell as though frozen at the feet of the triumphant marble figure.

It was in this situation that he was found by the painter Paul Trian, a true and treasured friend, who for his own friends makes sacrifices with indiscriminate charity, not needing to understand nor asking their secrets. He laid Gerard in a heated bed, rubbed him as hard as he could with his hands and a horse-hair glove, and hastily called for Dr. Spite, who, while feeling

pity for Gerard Saintry's suffering, had a certain satisfaction in seeing an incident which made him believe all his ideas were right.

"Ah!" said he, "must we still deny the enormous loss of caloric and nerve fluid caused by intellectual work? Here we have a man, vigorous, energetic, in good health, who in the middle of April, at a temperature of twelve degrees, is literally dying from cold, simply because he has given or rather has surrendered to inspiration all his vital warmth, and because he wanted to equal the ancients whom a supernatural force had sustained, by creating, in a century when a thinker is inevitably isolated, his admirable Omphale!"

The sick man heard this name and expelled a horrible deep sob. He sobbed for the entire time he was delirious with fever. Whenever he heard her name, which they were obliged to speak very often around him, he uttered long, sad, painful groans. Gerard was well cared for by Dr. Spite and watched over by his friend with a brotherly solicitude, and in the end he recovered. He seemed to have quite regained his self-possession and the balance of his faculties when, one morning, painfully raising himself up and leaning on his elbow, he said to Paul Trian:

"Listen, it is from her, from this Omphale, my incurable despair has come from her. I never want to see her again. As soon as I'm able to stand I'll take a long and distant journey, and if you don't mind, I'll ask you to receive and read my letters, to oversee all my interests and to take my place in everything. Have a notary come quickly, that I may give you the necessary power of attorney. As for the statue, smash her, sell her, give her away, do with her what you will, but may I never see her again, may I never feel her hand again, her dear hand, so frightfully cold!"

Paul Trian is a superior man whose talent touches on genius. He knows that one must not ask for explanations from those one loves, nor from those one does not love, and that there is never any need to understand things. Gerard went to Rome, where for more than a year he painted as a distraction, and found a way to respond somewhat to his murderous sadness through the dogged study of Michelangelo. However, with Paul Trian's efforts, Gerard's Omphale was exhibited at the Salon of 1880, where the immense success of this figure would certainly have won its creator the Grand Medal if an objection had not been made which appeared to be incontestable.

In its grandiose conception, in the simplicity and confidence of the execution which, with its quite modern, French touch and without any intention of pastiche, calls to mind the serene splendor of the Greek marbles, the Omphale seemed an eminent, unequalled work. But neither teachers nor artists, nor the jury, nor art critics could accept the tragic tear and its disquieting reality that Gerard Saintry had meticulously sculpted, so they thought, onto the cheek of the Lydian queen.

Praised, criticised, justified, contested and discussed, this tear occupied the artistic elite of Paris for a week. Some saw in it a protest from the old Romanticism of 1830, which was trying to raise its head one last time. Others, beginning to reel off a series of uncivil words, denounced this attempt as *realist* or... *naturalist!* The Minister received Paul Trian and told him that Gerard Saintry had for a long time been considered for the distinction of Officer of the Legion of Honor, which would certainly be conferred if he consented to removing, to lifting with a slip of a chisel, the scandalous marble tear.

Paul was careful not to write of this to his friend, for he had dutifully kept his promise, and in none of his letters did he mention the statue of Omphale, so instinctive was he that he could imagine Gerard's immense pain, so discreet that he did not want to be acquainted with it, thus uniting the rarest qualities that a man born of woman can possess. Yet the press had a field day, and the most highly esteemed journalist enjoyed embellishing Gerard Saintry's case with sparkling, whimsical literary fantasies in a sensational article entitled: *Phidias the Madrigalist*.

"Since time began," he wrote, "it has been asserted that women are sometimes in love with the men they torture, and even in his poem, *Atta Troll*, Heinrich Heine claims that Herodias was hopelessly in love with John the Baptist when she cut off his head, so she could later amuse

herself by bouncing it on a golden platter, playing with this bloody head as with an orange. It's also possible that Omphale, after buying her slave Hercules for three talents and reducing him to spinning wool and holding his distaff like an old woman, was a little remorseful for having treated him so, this valiant son of Amphitryon; but did she repent of this cruelty to the point of crying over it? This is what we cannot accept; and, in any case, if such a hypothesis can furnish a humorous poet with an amusing fantasy, it seems excessive to translate this madrigal into hard stone and to put a mauve suit on Phidias as though he had been such a good friend of Watteau that he'd be able to keep the adoring Amintes and Colombines close by him!"

Gerard Sainty obtained no reward; but the statue had caused such a sensation that it was sold for sixty thousand francs to Lord Bletso. When Gerard came back, he tried in vain to resume his old life and habits; the mere sight of his studio caused him unbearable anguish and he set off traveling again, this time in the company of the loyal Paul Trian. One day on a walking tour of Scotland, they saw a giant sinister castle with turrets of granite, rising before a dark forest. Flowing past it was a narrow river where black swans were swimming. When he caught sight of these unfamiliar walls, the sculptor felt his blood cease to flow, his limbs froze, he fell lifeless, and his friend had to carry him in his arms to the nearest inn. As soon as Gerard had revived and was out of danger, Paul secretly questioned the innkeeper, and here is what he learned. The castle belonged to Lord Bletso, and in it he had locked away the statue of Queen Omphale.

